

The First Fallen but We Will Overcome

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Standing outside of the cinema house, Rodrigo de Oliveira felt exhilarated by his attendance at more than 40 film festivals around the world to promote his HIV-themed feature film, "[The First Fallen](https://youtu.be/rtUhWJycmAw)." (<https://youtu.be/rtUhWJycmAw>)

"A sense of community is an abstract thing but I have seen the faces of many LGBTQI people during my tour," he said. "And in a way that is what I tried to show in my movie."

The film opens on New Year's eve in 1983. A young man is back in his Brazilian hometown having returned from Paris. He is feeling a bit gloomy and distant. He fears he has come down with something. There are rumblings of an unknown illness but AIDS or HIV is never mentioned until the last scene. De Oliveira chronicles the slow unravelling of the young man's health who "disappears" and hides in a country house. He is joined by a transgender woman and another acquaintance also feeling ill. They get various pills from a boyfriend in Paris. Some are early anti-retroviral pills but there are also vitamins and shark fin pills. All three despair at being struck down by a random disease.

"For me there is hope in knowledge, that is fundamental, but as you can see community and support are key to overcome anything," Mr de Oliveira said.

Rubbing his bald head with his hand he reflected that after seven feature films, this was his first one addressing LGBTQ and HIV issues.

"It took longer for my films to come out of the closet than myself," he said. "In 2021 I was still fresh-faced on the scene as an out gay man and I lost people to AIDS so this felt like a responsibility to the people I saw disappear in my life."

Born in 1985, Mr de Oliveira said he thought about HIV every week of his life. For him (as shown in the film) HIV meant death in the 80s and 90s. Since life-saving HIV treatment became readily available, living a healthy life with HIV has become the norm.

Mr de Oliveira explained that during one film screening young people did not know what it meant when two of the characters in his movie showed signs of Kaposi's Sarcoma (flat, discolored reddish patches on the skin, an indication of cancer triggered by a weak immune system in people living with HIV who are not taking medicine.)

"It was a shock for me this gap in knowledge," he said. Showing a slice of life from the mid-80s in his native country made even more sense to him following that conversation.

"The LGBTQI community is so used to being left out, we have to document ourselves and this is a testimony of this," Mr de Oliveira said. "My film with its three main characters approach their 'random illness' differently...one is a fighter, the other an archivist and the third an artist/scientist," he explained.

The three perspectives were important for him to document the fear, the dread and the conscious effort to overcome the crisis. By barely mentioning HIV, de Oliveira wanted to illustrate the 'grand silence' around the illness at the time.

In one scene, the young man's sister demands to see her brother in a run-down clinic but she is frozen out with staff saying, 'shame will close them down.'

"I wanted to talk about the stigma and discrimination, but I could not imagine staging actual aggression," he said.

Suki Beavers, UNAIDS Director of Gender Equality, Human Rights and Community Engagement, who shared the stage with Mr de Oliveira at a recent film screening in Geneva during the [Everybody's Perfect](https://www.everybodysperfect.ch/) (<https://www.everybodysperfect.ch/>) film festival, said that the movie reflected people's lack of rights. And that intersecting inequalities like being poor or being transgender or being gay or not having gone to school only compounded the hardships (the transgender character is fuming at being thrown off a bus after an altercation in one scene.)

"You see a clear violation of rights in Brazil during the 80s as well as activism to reclaim those rights," she said. "This phenomena is still very much alive in many parts of the world to this day, which is why we cannot give up on the fight to end AIDS."

Mr de Oliveira added that despite his film's more sombre note, he wanted people to walk away with the feeling that love is universal. "The kiss between budding friends exemplifies that we will overcome," he said.

He said that he would like to do two more feature films focusing on the evolution of the AIDS response like chronicling the 90s and then the last two decades.

"It takes me four to five years to make a film but know that I am on the same page as UNAIDS... ending AIDS," he said. "I just wish I could make a film a day like you save a life a day."

